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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 002202

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: THREE NEW POLITICAL PARTIES--OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER. REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

1. (C) Summary: INEC registered three new political parties June 22, bringing the total of approved parties to six. However, this doubling of the number of parties does not represent liberalization of the political landscape. At least two of the three parties, the NDP and the UNPP, are tied to former Head of State Babangida. The AGPA is more of a mystery. There is some indication of Babangida's involvement, as some believe the party is the former general's bridge to the Southeast. Still others think President Obasanjo's strategists registered the party to divide the Southeast in order to douse the prospect of a North-Southeast alliance against Obasanjo's presidential candidacy. In any event, the new parties are laden with former military officers as well as civilians who had attained comfortable niches under various military regimes. INEC did not register any of the less establishment-oriented parties that could have injected fresh blood into the electoral contests. In the end, the decision to register only these parties will assure that closed shop, politics-as-usual will be the dominant force during the upcoming election season. End Summary.

2. (U) The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) completed the party registration exercise on June 22, by certifying three new parties: the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), the National Democratic Party (NDP) and the United Nigeria Peoples Party (UNPP). Among the 24 parties that failed to make the cut were the NCP, led by veteran pro-democracy advocate Gani Fawehinmi and the PRP headed by progressive Northern political veteran, former Kaduna State Governor Balarabe Musa.

3. (C) The registration of the NDP and UNPP is not surprising but the AGPA validation was unexpected. Both the UNPP and the NDP have been linked to Ibrahim Babangida (IBB) and power structures of both groups are peopled with his acolytes. The UNPP has several retired senior military officers and former military Vice-President under Babangida, Augustus Aikhomu, is the Chairman of the UNPP's Board of Trustees. Both the UNPP and NDP have significant numbers of South/South political personalities and some Southeasterners. The NDP seems to have more Northerners in the formal party hierarchy than the UNPP. The AGPA appears to be heavily Igbo influenced but none of the Igbo major leaguers are formally involved. It is not immediately clear who are the heavy hitters, if any, behind the APGA.

4. (C) Discussions with UNPP and NDP members reveal strong attachment to IBB. Former Senator Dangana Ndayako, a founding member of the PDP and now a charter member of the NDP, told Polcouns that he and most party organizers supported an IBB candidacy. Two veteran reporters of the Nigerian political scene told the Ambassador that the euphoria in front of INEC headquarters when the approval of the three parties was publicly announced resembled a Babangida pep-rally. Appearing in equal numbers with party banners were those calling for IBB to run in 2003. UNPP and NDP party members spent as much time vocalizing their support for Babangida as celebrating their parties' successful registration. APGA members were much more restrained.

The UNPP - A Party and One-Half

5. (C) Ironically, by the time it was formally registered, the UNPP should have ceased to exist; it had previously merged with the APP to form the ANPP. However, that merger was de facto not de jure. With its successful registration, the UNPP is not only united with the APP in practice; it also retains its own distinct corporate existence as well. Unless INEC abrogates the merger on the basis that the UNPP had no legal existence at the time of the merger, the UNPP will enjoy the political equivalent of having its cake and eating

it too. While unique, this duality is also causing tension within the UNPP. Some UNPP members, who did not benefit from the merger, are claiming that the merger was a nullity and that, by their very actions, those UNPP members who favored the union have exited the party.

16. (C) Babangida allies who participated in the UNPP-APP merger into the ANPP are working to block former Head of State Buhari from capturing the ANPP nomination. Thus, in addition to influencing ANPP positions, the UNPP can still do its own thing as an independent party. One member of the APP before the merger told Polcouns in early July that Babangida's influence in the party has risen due to the UNPP influx and that Babangida will be one of the major factors determining who gets the party's nomination.

The AGPA- A Babangida Ploy, an Obasanjo Ruse, or Both?

17. (U) Taken at face value, the AGPA represents Igbo agitation for an Igbo President in 2003. In the end it probably will not be a major factor unless allied with another party. A Southeastern-based party with a one-issue platform (the ethnic identity of the President) does not have sufficient gravitational pull to stand alone. The situation changes if the party is allied with a Northern-oriented group, recreating the old North-Southeast axis.

18. (C) Here is where intrigue knocks at the door. Professor Ukandi Damachi, an intelligent, information peddler and consummate Babangida strap-hanger, recounted to Ambassador Jeter a July 5 meeting Damachi had with Babangida. Damachi jokingly told the former Head of State that with the registration of the UNPP and the NDP, Babangida had fathered twins. The former Head of State corrected Damachi, saying with a grin that he had "triplets," adding the APGA to the parties under his wing. However, an opposite spin on the APGA's pedigree was offered by Gani Fawehinmi. Fawehinmi, a staunch Obasanjo critic who has repeatedly called for the President's resignation, believes the APGA is Obasanjo's artifice to divide the Southeast and the Igbo vote. He claimed Obasanjo will try to bully and buy off APGA party officials so that the group will nominate him, thus undermining the solidarity of the call for an Igbo president. (Comment: Due to the convoluted nature of politics here, plausibly both Damachi and Fawehinmi are partially right. In that so much of what happens in determining the control of the party depends on who is the highest bidder, both the Obasanjo camp and Babangida may be trying to woo the AGPA for divergent reasons: IBB wants to build the North-Southeast Axis while Obasanjo seeks to prevent it. End Comment.).

19. (C) During a July 17 call on the Ambassador, representatives from the APGA (5 members of the National Executive Committee, including one-time presidential candidate Sarah Djibril) claimed that AGPA was the only party with no ties to the military elite. The APGA leadership disavowed that it was an Igbo dominated body, but with half of its leadership from the Southeast, that argument was not convincing. We do note that the second-in-command hails from Niger State, Babangida's home. This may be happenstance, but it gives rise to suspicions that IBB has access to APGA.

The Losing Side of Party Registration

110. (U) Ostensibly to advance the constitutional requirement that new parties reflect "federal character" (ethnic and regional diversity), INEC developed criteria to validate party registrations. The requirements included having offices in 24 states, filing affidavits that no members belong to any other party, establishing a transparent process for the election of national representatives and holding party membership open to all Nigerians.

111. (C) The goal of achieving "federal character" collided with the goal of opening the political space so that people with alternative ideas might compete in the electoral process. One disgruntled human rights activist caviled that someone who had creative ideas for improving his local community in Lagos was faced with a Hobson's choice. Either that person would have to form a party and accumulate

sufficient funds to "establish an office in Bauchi" and other far-flung places or, alternatively, join an existing political party. While the latter option would save money, the person would still have to bribe existing party officials to win the party's nomination. By committing that initial transgression, the person would be steadily infected by the politics of corruption. An isolated individual is no match and will be engulfed by Nigeria's system of moneyed politics, the activist lamented.

12. (C) Human rights activists not only bemoan the fact that the registration did not create more opportunities for political participation, many believe the registration process was retrogressive. These Nigerians point to the fact that IBB is bankrolling the UNPP, the NDP and perhaps the AGPA while also having placed a firm down payment to buy influence in the ANPP. Meanwhile Obasanjo's team is trying to strengthen control of the PDP and perhaps the APGA. Additionally, while attempting to fortify their positions within the various parties they influence, both likely will spend money to weaken each other and cause dissent in the heart of the others' camp.

COMMENT

13. (C) Many cynical Nigerians believe that INEC is not a free agent and the approval of the three parties was engineered by Obasanjo to fragment the strongest pockets of his opposition. For example, by registering the NDP he drives a wedge in the North and upper Middle Belt between the older Northern politicians in the ANPP and the younger ones in the NDP. Although the APP and UNPP have announced their merger creating the ANPP, a formal union has not yet taken place. Obasanjo's team will work hard to scuttle the union, in order to keep his opposition as divided as possible. As earlier stated, registering the AGPA may also be Obasanjo's way of keeping the Igbo's from gathering under one tent.

14. (C) Under a more charitable analysis, INEC did a credible job registering the parties that satisfy the guidelines. As one INEC official put it, "We know which parties are serious." However, pro-democracy activists counter that the electorate, not INEC should determine whether a party is "serious" or not. This criticism carries some merit. While INEC may have been pursuing the laudable goal of "federal character", its decision may have paid inadequate attention to political openness. For example, none of the "progressive" parties based in the Southwest or North were approved. While these parties have no chance of taking the election, their campaigns would have likely been more issue-based than the campaigns of the larger parties. As such, they might have put modest "peer pressure" on the major parties not to reside totally in the arena of power politics, but give some, albeit limited, attention to key economic and social issues facing the average Nigerian. However, these parties also would have chipped into some of the votes Obasanjo would likely win.
JETER